

# My Name Is Now...

Thousands of immigrants' names changed forever when they became Americans. Sometimes this happened by accident, but usually it was the immigrant's choice. Today, four out of every ten or 40% of Americans have ancestors who came to this country through Ellis Island. There are many stories about how immigrants' names were changed at Ellis Island. Most of the stories aren't true. There are funny stories about names that were misunderstood by immigration

inspectors, such as the story of the family who just smiled when asked their name, so their new name became . . . Smiley. But for the most part, those stories are untrue.

Sometimes, though, immigrants decided that they wanted new names. When they gave their names to the officers as they boarded ships for America or later when they applied for citizenship, they took new names. Some feared they would not be accepted in their new country if their name was too long or foreign-sounding. Long names often were shortened and combinations of letters

simplified. One family changed their name from "Katznelson" to "Nelson," for example.

Many families picked entirely different names, especially if they feared discrimination

**An inspector talks with an immigrant family at Ellis Island.**



based on their nationality or religion. They worried that they might not get a job or that their children might be teased. Friends and relatives already in America sometimes suggested ways to change names to make them sound less foreign. The German name Schwartz—which means “black” in German—became Black in English; the Lebanese name Haddad became Smith. People changed their first names too, often to a similar sounding name. The Japanese name Tamio became Tommy; Valentin became William. Even today, some immigrants change their names upon arrival.

Incoming families changed their names for many different reasons but mainly because they wanted to fit in in their new country. A new name

might smooth the road a bit and reduce discrimination. It could help children avoid being teased at school. It might be easier to get a job if an employer could pronounce your name.

Many families planned to stay forever and wanted to become American as soon as possible. Deciding to change their names was both difficult and hopeful. It was difficult because they were leaving another piece of their old life behind, shedding another part of their heritage and their identity. It was hopeful because they wanted to create a better life in the United States.

**Adapted from an article by Kerrily Sapet**

**Shipping companies prepared documents with passengers' names.**

COMPAGNIE GÉNÉRALE TRANSATLANTIQUE  
**INSPECTION CARD**  
(Immigrants and Steerage Passengers)

Port of departure **HAVRE**  
Name of ship, **LA LORRAINE**  
Name of Immigrant **Abdul Bahia**  
Date of departure **FEB 22 1912**  
Last residence **Alexandria**

Inspected and passed at **HAVRE**  
Passed at quarantine, port of \_\_\_\_\_, U. S.  
Passed by Immigration Bureau  
port of \_\_\_\_\_

Ship's list or manifest No. **17**  
No. on ship's list or manifest \_\_\_\_\_

U.S. DEPT. OF COMMERCE  
BUREAU OF IMMIGRATION  
NEW YORK